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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 NOUAKCHOTT 000343

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/20/2019

TAGS: PGOV PREL PINR MR

SUBJECT: THE FIRST LADY: NOT THE PRIMA DONNA DETRACTORS

CLAIM SHE IS

Classified By: Ambassador Mark Boulware for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Ambassador Boulware's wife and EconOff spent the day with First Lady Khatou Mint El Boukhary while Ambassador met with President Abdallahi. Boukhary, portrayed by many as controlling and demanding, was warm and down to earth and clearly pleased by Mrs. Boulware's visit. She thanked the United States and the Ambassador and his wife personally for supporting democracy in Mauritania. She went on to call the United States "the only truly democratic country." Boukhary used the meeting as an opportunity to try to clear her name and accused Aziz of using her to get to her husband. She appears to be following the political situation closely and reiterated many of the FNDD's talking points. She stated that while she wanted her four children to leave Mauritania so that they could live their lives, she and her husband would stay to fight for democracy. She added however, that if things "don't work out" in Mauritania, she would go to the U.S. and claim asylum and continue the fight for democracy in Mauritania. End Summary.

BIOGRAPHY

¶2. (SBU) Boukhary, born in 1953, is a member of the Ouled Bisbaa tribe and is a cousin of both General Aziz and Colonel Vall. She was born in Nouakchott but her family and tribal ties are to the town of Akjoujt in the Inchiri region. She has four children. Boukhary inherited property from her father and grandfather, giving her a certain degree of financial independence. She speaks both French and Arabic fluently, indicating that she was formally educated. She does not speak English.

BOUKHARY VS. AZIZ

¶3. (U) Following the coup, General Aziz and his partisans accused Boukhary of using her charitable organization, the KB Foundation, to siphon off government funds. Others stated that those hoping to gain influence with the President had to first make a donation to her foundation. Boukhary and her son Mohamed, who was the director of the foundation, were both brought before the Senate following the coup where

senators loyal to Aziz tried to question them about the foundation's activities and finances. Both refused to answer questions. While there are many rumors about her foundation's activities and operations, there has never been any evidence produced to support the accusations.

¶4. (C) While speaking with Mrs. Boulware, Boukhary was intent upon clearing her name. She stated several times that she had never done anything wrong and had never taken any money. She added that during the time she was active with her foundation, she never even received a salary. She characterized the accusations against her as simply pro-coup groups using her to get to her husband. She said that the President had always been above the fray and his opponents had nothing that they could use against him. As a result, they tried to attack him by accusing her of corruption and abusing her position. She defended the work of her foundation and noted all of the social and charitable work that it had done for the Mauritanian people. She added that as a result of her frequent travels throughout the country, she was able to report back to her husband on the conditions and sentiments of the people.

BOUKHARY: POLITICALLY ACTIVE BEHIND THE SCENES

¶5. (C) While Boukhary plays the role of the loyal wife, she is clearly following political developments closely. She recited all of the FNDD's talking points for Mrs. Boulware

NOUAKCHOTT 00000343 002 OF 003

and EconOff and made no attempt to hide her contempt for Aziz. Boukhary repeatedly stated that she was a "true democrat" and that the United States was "the only true democratic and free country." She expressed her appreciation for the support of the United States and Ambassador and Mrs. Boulware personally. She said that her support for democracy in Mauritania had moved beyond support for her husband as the President to the institution of democracy. She expressed her intention to continue fight for democracy in Mauritania. She said several times that if "things don't work out" for them in Mauritania (she did not say exactly what she meant by this) that she would go to the United States and claim political asylum where she would continue her fight for democracy in Mauritania.

¶6. (C) Boukhary was very insistent that her children needed to leave Mauritania. Stating that while she and the President could stay and fight, her children "had their lives to live." Two sons, Mounir and Ahmed, are already living in Spain. Her other son Mohamed, who is married to an Amcit and lived in the U.S. for many years, may eventually return to the United States. Her daughter Amal recently took and passed the the UN's employment exam, and is expected to take up a position with the UN soon.

LIFE AFTER THE COUP

¶7. (C) Many stated that prior to the coup, Boukhary and Abdallahi had a strained and difficult relationship. Observers routinely asserted that Boukhary was demanding and created at least as many problems for Abdallahi as the political opposition did. Note: Traditionally in the Moor culture, men are supposed to spoil their wives and give them whatever they ask for. Women attempt to accumulate wealth from their husbands to protect themselves in case of their husband's death or divorce as alimony and child support do not exist in Mauritania. End note. The extent of Boukhary's demands on her husband is unclear. In any case, Boukhary does not appear to be leading an extravagant lifestyle at the current time. There were no visible signs of wealth present in their house and her clothes, shoes, jewelry and purse were all quite modest. While there were several members of the

household staff present, she was just as likely to get up and take care of things herself as she was to ask a member of the staff to do it.

¶ 18. (C) In meetings with Boukhary prior to the coup, she was extremely formal and could at times appear stand-offish. She told Mrs. Boulware that while the coup was a terrible thing for the country, for her personally it was a good thing. She said that she had felt suffocated living in the presidential palace by the all of the protocol formalities. She said that she was much happier now living in the small village because she could move about freely and there was much less pressure.

Indeed, she appeared very relaxed and informal at her modest house in Lemden. She also appeared very touched to have the Ambassador's wife visit and take an interest in her situation.

¶ 19. (C) While Boukhary seems to have settled into life in Lemden, she appeared anxious to be able to travel abroad again. In the meantime, she continues to travel regularly to Nouakchott to care for her elderly mother and to visit her sisters. She mentioned that she had a thyroid condition that she needs treatment for in Europe. She also has a congenital heart defect that causes tachycardia on occasion. While she said that surgery was not an option because of her age, it still needed to be monitored. She also mentioned that the President needed to see his doctor in Spain, although she did not specify for what condition. She appears to have lost weight since the last time Mrs. Boulware and EconOff saw her in person before the coup.

¶ 10. (C) Comment: Boukhary appeared to be in good spirits and
NOUAKCHOTT 00000343 003 OF 003

genuinely happy to receive Mrs. Boulware. During the visit, she appeared nothing like the cold and demanding person that Abdallahi's detractors portray her as. As for her claim that that she will go to the U.S. and claim asylum if things don't work out, this seems unlikely. Although the President has mentioned leaving Mauritania before, he has never discussed the possibility of going to the U.S. for anything more than a short visit. Boukhary appears prone to exaggeration on occasion, and her comments about claiming asylum were more likely an attempt to build rapport with Mrs. Boulware and show her appreciation for U.S. support than anything that she is likely to actually do. End comment.

BOULWARE